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## **The Sita Syndrome: Examining the Communicative Aspects of Domestic Violence from a South Asian Perspective**

By Archana Pathak Bhatt<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This essay explores the communicative aspects of domestic violence by articulating the Eurocentric components of domestic violence research. Utilizing a post-colonial ethnography, this essay reconceptualizes domestic violence from a South Asian perspective, articulating the ways in which relational violence, its acceptance and its social function are gendered.

*Keywords:* domestic violence, cultural narratives, gender, family, South Asian, post-colonial ethnography

### **Introduction**

In the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, the heroine queen, Sita gives everything up to follow her husband into exile. Despite her deep seated loyalty and commitment, Sita is continuously tested, questioned and doubted. Even when she passes the most rigorous of tests for fidelity, the *agnipariksha*, (the fire test), doubt remains and ultimately she is punished with banishment.<sup>1</sup> In the fire test, Sita steps into a bonfire asking the fire god *Agni* to burn her if she is impure. However, even as she stands amidst the flames, Sita is left unscathed, proving that like gold, she is pure and untouched by the fire. *Agni* lifts Sita out of the fire and places her next to King Rama, claiming that she has passed the strictest of purity tests and she has proven her purity without a doubt. However, despite passing such a difficult standard of purity, Sita was ultimately banished from her husband's palace and sent to live in the forest. Sita is the ultimate standard of selflessness and loyalty. Despite the cost to her and her status, throughout the epic, she acts with a focus on what is best for her husband. Sita's story is well known throughout the South Asian communities both in South Asia and in the U.S. diaspora. The story is passed down through long standing oral traditions as well more contemporary political and media outlets (Zacharias, 2001) This story exemplifies the way in which narratives shape, discipline and control identity performances as Sita becomes the marker of ideal womanhood. Social constructionist perspectives articulate the idea that one's social identity exists in the ways in which it is performed (Goffman, 1959). This notion is further articulated by feminist and race scholars who focus on the ways in which our identities exist both in our performance and in the ways that those performances are informed by larger social structures (Butler, 1999, Diamond, 1996). This body of

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literature illuminates the ways in which social identities are made meaningful in the context of how they are engaged and performed for others and through the systems of power that inform our day to day interactions. In the telling and retelling of Sita's story, women and men learn to read gendered behavior through this frame. The crux of relational violence resides amongst these stories so that extreme acts of violence, such as but not limited to physical abuse, categorical isolation, and migration violence<sup>2</sup> become end results rather than mere indicators of domestic abuse. The abuse exists in the communicative nature of the culture rather than in these symptomatic acts of abuse.

High rates of domestic violence, minimal support and limited understanding of domestic violence intervention and prevention continue to plague the United States, even now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Dietz, 1996). This disjuncture is even greater for communities of color where cultural systems are starkly different than Euro/White U.S. cultural norms. This is particularly true amongst the U.S. South Asian diaspora. Despite living in the U.S., South Asian women, and particularly Indian Hindu women strive to emulate Sita and fulfill the duties of the ideal Indian woman. The lack of understanding and articulation about the nature of domestic violence is exacerbated by the dearth of information about various ethnic groups in the U.S. and the unique ways in which domestic violence impacts these communities. This essay serves to reconceptualize domestic violence in terms of the South Asian diaspora in the United States by specifically focusing on the communicative nature of abuse in these communities. While most domestic violence research focuses on the culminating act of physical violence (including extreme isolation and actions against the victim in terms of her migratory status), I focus on ways in which cultural narratives and everyday interaction co-constitute a space of verbal and emotional abuse.

### **Current literature on domestic violence**

Much of the literature on family communication and domestic violence is primarily Euro/western-centric. While there has been work done to redefine the notion of family, alternative family structures are presented as just that, alternative (Thorne & Yalom, 1992). Thus, there is minimal research exploring the ways in which these "alternative" families function. In the case of immigrants, these "alternative" families are actually traditional family structures for the culture that have been modified to adjust to U.S. lifestyles. These family structures include joint families in which the son's parents and/or his younger married brothers and their families live with their son and his family; extended families in which younger siblings of either spouse reside with the family while their marriages are being decided; and/or extensive family involvement in a couple's life regardless of geographic proximity. These structures are common place for immigrant families. Additionally, the research on multicultural families focuses primarily on family structure and rarely on family communication. Thus, while the unit of analysis itself is reconceptualized, the underlying presumption is that the communication behaviors are culturally neutral and remain the same.

That said, there is a vital growing body of literature examining issues of domestic violence amongst South Asians in the United States. This body of literature is theoretically rigorous and explores issues at a global level, specifically engaging in

cutting edge transnational, postcolonial, feminist critiques (Hedge 1999, Dasgupta, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996, 1997; Supriya, 2002; Abraham, 1998, 2000). However, much of this research is framed in the context of prevention and advocacy (Nankani, 2000; Preisser, 1999). This essay serves to extend and add to the existing research about domestic violence in the U.S. South Asian diasporic community by examining the communicative aspects of domestic violence focusing specifically on family and cultural narratives that shape the communicative climate in South Asian families which in turn often frame a culture of abuse. Additionally, this essay establishes a frame for analyzing domestic violence both as an act of communication and as existing through the communication acts that exist in it. Communication, such as the things individuals say, the ways in which they say them, the ways in which the individuals talk about each other to others and the ways in which they are talked about serves to shape the experiences of the individuals. Additionally, the way we talk about things in the world are the things themselves. Definitions of a thing are produced through our talking about them. Thus, our experiences are both material and discursive. We know what we experience partly because we talk about it. This talking about and creation through talk is the communicative aspect of the experience. It is this aspect of domestic violence that serves as the central point of analysis in this essay.

### **Euro/western-centric definitions of domestic violence**

Most of what we understand about domestic violence is in actuality derived from academic, therapeutic and political analysis of Euro-American/western, post industrial, nuclear family structures. In such analyses, domestic violence is defined as when a family member, partner or ex-partner tries to physically or psychologically dominate or harm the other (Cornia, 1999). In the following section, I will explore the assumptions underlying this definition and articulate how these assumptions reveal a primarily Euro/western-centric, post industrial nuclear family system; the predominant model; although the research is presented as culturally neutral and broadly applicable.

In the predominant model, domestic violence is most often defined as primarily occurring between partners and/or in parent/child relationships (which is usually an offshoot of the partner abuse). Presumptively the abuse in this model occurs between the two individuals and is primarily executed in private<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, the interpersonal power is located with the perpetrator, who is usually the male partner.<sup>4</sup> The perpetrator psychologically presents as an individual who lacks control (specifically in terms of anger management), or has issues with control (is overly controlling); may suffer from mental, emotional, and/or physiological illness (i. e. alcoholism, addiction, etc.); and ultimately requires intensive therapy and resocialization (Ewing, 1987). Most importantly, in this scenario, the perpetrator has primary agency and therapeutic engagement is centered on utilizing that agency in a healthier, more acceptable way. This is done through discourses of ownership, accountability, responsibility and self-control.

In contrast, the victim is positioned in a power down position and is usually the female partner and/or the children in the household. The victim psychologically presents as the passive recipient who may suffer from a lack of self worth or self empowerment; rarely has any agency while in the cycle of abuse; may suffer from mental, emotional

and/or physiological illness (i.e. depression, anxiety, etc.); and ultimately requires intensive therapy and external aid to develop the strength, skills and resources to leave the abusive situation. Most importantly, in this scenario, the victim lacks agency and therapeutic agency is centered on developing individual agency. This is done through discourses of empowerment and self worth (Lawless, 1998).

There are three presumptions underlying both the role of perpetrator and victim. First is the assumption of the individuality of each actor. In most domestic violence research, both the perpetrator and the victim are seen as separate units who may collectively change a situation, but ultimately each must engage in individual change and overall effective change comes from the participants themselves (i.e. they have to want to change). Second is the presumption that effective change is primarily internal. This presumption reveals the highly self reflexive nature of western psychotherapy. It argues that ultimately change comes from within and self awareness leads to better life circumstances. The final presumption is that the roles of perpetrator and victim are stand alone identities which are causally conflated with each other. The only relational context addressed in discussing the abuse is the one of the intimate relationship and the only relationship addressed as requiring repair is the marital relationship.

Second, the nature of the abuse itself is presented in a linear progressive manner. Most communication and domestic violence research (Wood, 2000) presents the cycle of abuse in four phases: tension building, escalating/violent incident, honeymoon/calm, return to phase one. The tension building phase includes minor conflicts, threats of violence and mounting tension in the home environment; the escalating/incident phase occurs when threats are carried through, turn to violence and “actual” harm is done to the victim. This phase usually occurs in private and the victim can do little to stop it; the honeymoon/calm phase occurs when the abuser feels remorse for his actions, begs forgiveness, presents gifts of apology and may even promise to seek help or vow to never commit violence again; and, the final phase is the redevelopment of the tension building phase (Stark, 1995, Wood, 2005, Cuklanz, 2006).

Though the term “cycle” is utilized, the actual process of violence is better represented as a continuous spiral climb. Though the original definition states that domestic violence can be psychological, the cycle is predicated on a single incident or a series of incidents which is generally marked by a physical act (pushing, shoving, slapping, etc.). The assumption is that violence rarely occurs once and that acts of violence will continue to escalate each time the couple enter the escalating/incident phase. Thus, the belief is that if the cycle of abuse is not disrupted, each recurring incident will be increasingly more violent. This reveals an underlying presumption of human behavior as evolutionary and progressive, usually without external checks and balances. Additionally, in most current domestic violence research, the participants are those who are pathologized and the act of abuse is a product of their pathologies. This further reinforces a highly individuated understanding of humans and their function within relationships.

All of these descriptions of “typical” domestic violence scenarios reflect a Euro/western-centric, industrialized perspective of family, identity and relationships. While largely unnamed, the underlying presumption of this research is that the Euro-

American/western nuclear family is the norm and analysis of that unit can and does serve as a template for analysis of all family units. However, the literature on domestic violence in the South Asian communities clearly belies that claim (Nankani, 2000; Abraham, 2000).

### **Method/ological disruptions**

Communication Studies scholar Raka Shome (1996) argues that “it is important to place the texts that we critique or the theories that we produce against a larger backdrop of neocolonialism and racism, and interrogate to what extent these discourses and our own perspectives on them reflect contemporary global politics of (neo)imperialism” (p. 41). Communication Studies scholars Raka Shome & Radha Hegde (2002) further explicate this call. “Postcolonial scholarship because of the politics of its emergence and the nature of the problems it is concerned with exists in tension with established institutionalized knowledge. It attempts to undo (and redo) the historical structures of knowledge production that are rooted in various histories and geographies of modernity” (p. 250). They continue, “postcolonial scholarship often finds itself colliding with the limits of knowledge structures – in terms of scope and method – derived from, and enabled by, various imperial and national modernities within which Anglo-Euro academy was produced and is ensconced. In the process it tries to redo such epistemic structures by writing against them, over them, and from below them by inviting reconnections to obliterated pasts and forgotten presents that never made their way into the history of knowledge” (p. 250). This call frames my method and methodology by both guiding my approach to ethnographic fieldwork and shaping my reconceptualization of domestic violence. Just as Shome & Hedge’s essays serve as a theoretical foundation for the postcolonial scholar in Communication Studies, Communication Studies scholar Christina Gonzalez’s work builds on that foundation for the postcolonial ethnographer. Gonzalez (2000) argues *all* research has guiding ideals that are the cultural assumptions that shape the reality within which one’s research is conducted. For the social scientific tradition, these are: opportunism, independence of the researcher, entitlement and the primacy of rationality. The postcolonial ethnographer is bound by the ethic of continuously working to disrupt these assumptions and not inadvertently reproduce a colonialist voice, through the research process or the research product.

The marking of the field (which constitutes the research space in ethnography) has been a problematic one in the evolution of ethnography (Clifford, 1992). Historically, much of ethnography has marked and been marked by the colonial enterprise. From these dubious roots, ethnography quickly moved to a more celebratory method that served to elucidate the ways of the “other” in the world. In this era, ethnography was defined as studies of people who lived in far away (either physically or culturally from the ethnographer). Despite this positive shift, ethnography continued to hold the ethnographer as a neutral, non marked observer who most likely came from the Western world and studied those of the non-Western world. There was little if any question regarding power and culture in terms of the ethnographer and his relation to the research field. In fact, most of the training of ethnographers called for a position of absence from the research site. It was a call for the ethnographer to become so common

in the field that he disappeared and was not an intrusive presence for his participants. The omniscience of the ethnographer sustained the colonialist gaze in the ethnographic enterprise, despite its best intentions. Ethnography was soon called to question by feminist and race scholars who were questioning the overarching problematics of the western gaze in academia. This questioning led to a burgeoning of insider ethnographies, studies done by members of the group being studied. While this opened up the breadth of research being done, it did not effectively disrupt the underlying assumptions of power between the ethnographer and her field. Though these ethnographers were now studying their own groups, they continued to design their studies utilizing the prevailing method with its underlying presumptions of omniscience, the “other,” and distance between researcher and researched.

This gave rise to the question of what happens when the ethnographer is both trained in the western tradition of social science and visibly marked with a body of the third world, one who gets studied. Visweswaran (1994) addresses this in her discussion of fieldwork as failure. She articulates that one cannot construe ethnography as fieldwork (p. 102). However, to proclaim that the field is everywhere is equally problematic. The question then becomes, what is marked as the field and what is marked as home? Visweswaran answers, “‘Homework’ is, I contend the actualization of what some writers have termed ‘anthropology in reverse.’ . . . it is this going and returning that organizes the epistemological and geographical disposition of the anthropological gaze” (p. 102). Homework then becomes “the questioning of heretofore unexamined points of privilege and blindness that forms the basis of an accountable positioning that seeks to locate itself in and against the master discourse of race, class and sexuality that inscribe it” (Visweswaran, p. 104). My work on domestic violence is my homework as I examine my own identity as a South Asian woman born in India and raised in the U.S. South Asian diasporic community. I cannot mark my participants or my fields as “other” as these are people I live among and the places I observe are home to me. Nor can I other myself, as the stories I hold echo the whispered stories I have heard since I was a young girl. These are my stories; this is my home; I am my own participant.

Engaging both Shome’s mandate of postcoloniality in communication, Gonzalez’s encouragement to articulate the ontology of a postcolonial ethnography and Visweswaran’s call to do homework, I argue that as a critical, postcolonial ethnographer, I engage in homework as I disrupt the scientific imperialism of logical positivist approaches to studying communication and specifically the imperialism of traditional ethnography, all which were intrinsic part of my training. My fieldwork then, calls to question the very location of race/ethnicity/culture in both naming South Asian identity as distinctly different in South Asia and in the diaspora and disrupting it by acknowledging the communicative fluidity of this identity by examining the ways in which South Asia is co-constituted through narratives, history and ancestry as much as geography, which I am often denied as my identity is both called to question and overdetermined by my physical markings.

Utilizing postcolonial ethnography (Gonzales, 2003) as my primary method, my analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork from various South Asian diasporic communities throughout the U.S. This fieldwork was done in the tradition of homework

(Visweswaran, 1994) inasmuch as I am a native member of the community I observed. My fieldwork amongst the South Asian diasporic communities in the U.S. and amongst mainstream middle class families in India served as basis for this essay. Though my original ethnographic observations were focused on issues of communication and identity amongst members of the growing South Asian diaspora in the U.S., the issues of domestic violence, stories of gender violence, and pervasive stories of cultural pressures on gender identity and marital relations permeated my observations in the field, informal interviews with participants and interviews with key informants. Additional fieldwork specifically focused on issues of domestic violence occurred during my years of volunteer work with South Asian domestic violence prevention organizations. It is important to note that I did not include formal interviews in this work in order to protect participants. Additionally, I chose not to include formal interviews specifically because too often, in stories of oppression and violence, individuals' stories are trivialized as merely idiosyncratic and not reflections of larger cultural structures. I chose to create an intentional focus on the interactive and communicative nature of domestic violence by focusing my ethnographic writing on larger observations rather than focusing on specific stories. As evidenced earlier, the work on survivors of domestic violence in the South Asian community is rich.

That said, this research is based on ongoing ethnographic research in large South Asian diasporic communities in the U.S., including Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and the Bay Area. The study also includes observations from 8 months of ethnographic field study in India amongst middle class Gujarati families residing in mid to large size towns in Gujarat, India and Mumbai, India. All observations and participants in this research were members of Hindu Indian families.

Specifically, it is important to note that the cultural and familial narratives explicated in the thematic analysis are based on the ways these stories are told and shared in everyday interaction. This disrupts the traditional Western bias toward written text as a primary source of knowledge. While the narratives may have written forms, their germinal manifestations are in the mundane referencing that happens in every interaction. Thus, I am specifically *not* interested in the accuracy or legitimacy of these narratives; rather, my interest is in the ways in which these stories become part of communicative fabric that shapes identity.

### **Emergent Themes**

Several themes emerged from my field/homework. These themes are strongly interconnected and also warrant specific individual attention. While it is problematic to group all South Asian experiences into one monolithic umbrella of analysis, certain points carry a degree of salience that cross regional and religious differences. However, given my ethnographic field and my key informants, my analysis focuses on North and Northwestern Indian Hindu families.

#### *Family*

Family is recognized as a primary influence on one's communicative self (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995). In South Asian communities, family serves as the both



the source of self definition and the system which monitors and dictates socially constructed notions of self (Mehrotra, 1999). Additionally, the concept of extended family goes beyond the simplistic definition of family as a unit inclusive of multiple members. Extended joint families are those in which familial roles and organization of those roles is positioned in terms of family lineage and membership. This means that members beyond nuclear family members are not simply additive; rather, one understands family with one's own nuclear unit as a component of the larger, more meaningful, integrated structure. To understand how domestic violence works within the South Asian communities, it is first important to understand the family structure and power distribution within that structure.

To begin, most South Asian Hindu communities are patrilineal and patriarchal (Hegde, 1999). One's identity stems from one's relationship with primary males in the family and social, legal, and communal power is assigned to and through males. Thus, a female child is known by her father's identity, status and name until her marriage is arranged. Then, she is known by her husband's identity, status and name.<sup>5</sup>

Women's value is designated first through their viability to "make a good marriage," then through their marital status and finally through their motherhood status. From the moment of birth, daughters are seen as guests in their natal homes and the family considers it their responsibility to prepare her for her role as wife and mother. This is evidenced in sayings such as "raising a daughter is like watering a neighbor's plant" and "a girl is known as a guest" and by admonitions to young girls such as "what will happen when you go to your home? Better learn how to (do a particular domestic chore) now so you know what to do when you get there." The essential element of this preparation is purity<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, her ability and performance as daughter and wife carries with it the family's honor within the community. Amongst Hindu families, the misbehavior by a daughter creates *sharm* (shame) for the daughter and for her family. In all cases, the family honor is overtly protected by direct oversight of women by the males and older females in the extended family, but it is also implicitly protected by powerful, insidious discourses about "goodness," femininity, and social membership that are taught to women from childhood. Thus, a woman who is married has more social value than an unmarried woman. Additionally, a woman who is the mother of sons holds the highest value (Bumiller, 1990; Hegde, 1999).

The distinction between men and women in South Asian diasporic communities<sup>7</sup> in the U.S. and amongst middle class families in small town India is the grossest level of distinction. In reality, the ways in which social relationships are understood and power is distributed within and among family members is much more nuanced. One manifestation of this nuance is that articulations of control of women are couched in positive correlations; thus, it is never discussed as women *not* having something, rather, they *have* something else.

Hinduism defines women as incarnations of the goddess, specifically Laxmi, the goddess of wealth (see *Devi Mahima, Rig Veda*). Traditionally, Hindu families accept this articulation of womanhood and utilize it to discursively create meaning for women in the family. In these manifestations, women are considered powerful, desired and integral. However, sometimes in Hindu families, it is also believed that anything with

such power is dangerous and must be watched at all times. Thus, the men in the family are mandated to protect the family name through the control of the women. Additionally, when women behave well, this behavior is seen as *natural* as a goddess/good person would always know how to act. However, if a woman behaves inappropriately, the action is seen as a complete breakdown and betrayal of the family. This hegemonic structure positions women as simultaneously imminently powerful and completely powerless. The system also makes it such that a man's honor stems from the actions of the women in his family, obfuscating the impact of his own behavior on his honor. Thus, men are taught to hyper surveil women's behavior and rarely learn any definitive relationship between their own behavior and the family's honor, reputation and wealth.

Clearly, the implicit argument in the above paragraphs is that sons are highly valued. A son's value is intrinsic; his very existence assures the family's value in the community. However, at a certain age, a son is pressured to marry because a Hindu family needs Laxmi in the home and this can only be achieved by bringing in a wife. The consequences for a man remaining unmarried are not nearly as costly in terms of family honor; however, it is a point of concern. Amongst sons, birth order designates social position. Elder sons carry more power in the family and often hold greater responsibility, with the first son stepping in as the family patriarch in the event of the father's death.<sup>8</sup>

While there is a clear gender bias in favor of males, as with any complex hegemonic structure, power is not simply given to men and kept from women. Power is distributed by degree and often used to assure complicity from those oppressed within the system. Indeed, as I will explain in detail later, much of the verbal and emotional abuse of women comes from other women in the marital home. Thus, it is important to specifically examine the distribution of power amongst women in the family.

### *Women and Power*

The matriarch of the family is usually the mother-in-law who has sons. Her status is enhanced if her husband is alive, though she continues to hold familial power even if she is a widow<sup>9</sup>. In the daily interactions and management of the family, wives married to the sons of the family have power based on birth order of the sons. However, daughters of the family have greater power than their brothers' wives. While being a wife gives a woman more status in society, she is categorically positioned as an outsider in her marital home and the perpetual test of a wife is her ability to treat her marital home as her primary home while having her loyalty to that home continuously and implicitly questioned.

Unmarried daughters of the family who are of marriageable age share the primary power with the family matriarch (their mother). They usually manage the household under the supervision of their mother. Married daughters become the focal point of the family when they return to their natal homes for visits. The return of a married daughter<sup>10</sup> is heralded as a gift. She is pampered and celebrated. This is done because the expectation is that her life in her marital home is difficult and her return to her natal home affords her a much needed rest. For example, her favorite foods are cooked, family and friends gather to visit and hear stories. When she is sent back to her in-laws, she is sent back with gifts of clothes and foodstuff.

Another aspect of patrilineal and patriarchal families is that it is expected that sons take care of their parents both physically and financially. Thus, the family matriarch and patriarch may reside with their sons after the sons marry. In the most traditional of families, married sons and their families reside in the family home. If there is not a family home per se, parents move amongst their sons' homes with the responsibility of their care shared amongst the brothers. Married daughters are informed of their parents' care, but it is presumed that their primary responsibility is to provide care for their in-laws. In fact, amongst some Hindu families, it is taboo for parents to reside with or even visit a married daughter for an extended period of time. If parents do visit their married daughters', it is seen as a sign of liberalness, urbaneness and tolerance on the part of the woman's in-laws for allowing such a visit.

#### *Wives in the family system*

This becomes important in how wives are then positioned in terms of power, labor and membership within their marital families. While the majority of household labor falls on the wife/wives, the decision-making power in terms of amount and degree of labor, daily family management, and major family decisions lie with the husbands who tend to rely on their parents and/or sisters for guidance with decision making or to whom they delegate the responsibility. Household issues are seen as women's domain and thus men rarely take interest in such decision making. However, if there is dissent amongst the women (either between wives or between wives and mother-in-law or sisters-in-law) the patriarch of the family may step in to either discipline or intervene and reestablish order.

In terms of work distribution, the expectation is that the wife will do the work in the home. "Doing work" can range from serving as a primary helper to the matriarch or actually doing all the work herself under the management of the matriarch. For example, in one home, I consistently observed the sole wife plan and execute the family meals. Though she made all the decisions regarding the food choice and did a majority of the labor for preparing the meals, the wife would always ask her mother-in-law if she could make the menu she had planned. Usually the response was positive, though at times the mother-in-law would change certain items. These changes could be categorized in 2 ways: some changes were in terms of food preference. Thus, if a particular vegetable had been made recently or was not particularly liked by any of the men in the house, the mother-in-law would suggest a change. The second category of change that I observed regularly was primarily an arbitrary power up behavior. If the daughter-in-law had acted inappropriately (i.e. denied her husband's request; negated or contradicted a comment by the mother-in-law or husband; reprimanded her child against the wishes of the in-laws or husband), the mother-in-law would request a change in the menu that would decrease the facility of food preparation for the day. She might request a vegetable that was not already prepped (precut, in store at home) or she might request a menu item the daughter-in-law did not particularly like or was not particularly adept in preparing.

In another home, I consistently observed the wife function as a helper to the mother-in-law and her daughters. Though the wife was of similar age as one of the unmarried daughters, she was always assigned to serve as the helper to either her mother-

in-law or her sister-in-law. All decisions were made either by the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law and tasks were assigned to the wife; overall implementation of any activity was conducted by the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law even if the wife did a majority of the labor. A specific example was the presentation of meals in which the food was served by the sister-in-law, giving her public recognition for the meal while the wife performed the underlying labor of preparing the meal. Regardless of position, a wife's autonomy is established by the matriarch and can be arbitrarily changed at any time.

### *Familial and cultural narratives*

To understand the complicated way in which this system works, it is necessary to explore the ways in which social narratives reflect these conventions. Women's work is both invisible and overtly central within the family. At any point that there is a breakdown in the management of the family home, the social narrative utilized attributes the breakdown to the lack of ability, preparedness, or intrinsic badness of the wife. For example, during field work I attended a dinner at a family's home. At one point, I was looking for a particular item that I wanted more of. I did not easily see the dish, but another male member of the family noticed that I was looking for something. Immediately, it was explained to me that the wife's birth family was not a family that entertains often, so she doesn't know how to do make sure a guest has everything he/she needs. This was said in a joking manner; however, it created a moment of awkwardness. The wife looked down and quickly served me the dish. Though I was tempted to respond, I knew that prolonging attention to the "error" would further embarrass the wife.

However, if such an event goes smoothly, the success is attributed to the marital family. A wife may also be blamed for wanting to ruin the family's reputation or for having "bad blood"<sup>11</sup> that surfaces and makes her act poorly. These claims were most commonly marked in intercaste marriages in which the marital family often denigrated the wife in terms of her caste. For example, comments would be made such as "Those people (referencing the wife's caste) are like that; they aren't like us so what can we expect?" Oftentimes, family members will discuss the wife in ways that reinforce the idea that she is a "loose cannon." There are common narratives in which sisters-in-law discuss how they must be nice to their brothers' wives, or their brothers will suffer. I often heard sisters-in-law, when talking to their brothers' wives seemingly jokingly comment, "I have to be nice to you; what would happen to my brother if I wasn't?" Additionally, there is a strongly held belief that one must tread lightly with a wife because her anger could curse the family. For example, a Hindu parable explains that the combined anger of all the gods cannot equal the anger of one goddess. At the same time, family members discuss the position of wife as perpetual outsider, one who undermines a man's loyalty to his family and the unknown variable in the equation of family dynamics. In one home, I audienced a conversation between a brother and sister discussing the wife of another brother who had recently married. The sister was complaining that her newly married brother was paying too much attention to his wife and this was negatively impacting both of their participation in the family. The brother snorted and immediately responded, "You know that once there is a wife, these problems begin. He (the newly married brother) loses all sense and we suffer for it. She'll always distract him." When

there is more than one wife (because there is more than one brother)<sup>12</sup>, often the wives are watched so as not to create cohorts of alliance amongst them. This was most often witnessed in several families where mothers-in-law would often casually enter in a room (usually the kitchen) where several wives' would be working and talking and ask what had prompted a bout of laughter or what the topic of discussion was. Additionally, this was also at times communicated by others in the family and/or community offering overt commentary comparing wives. For example, one woman speaking to me about another family in the community openly stated, "(Wife #2's name) is the difficult one. (Mother-in-law's name) really suffers because of that one. But what can we do? We have to put up with it.

The question of loyalty underlies several relational dynamics in the home. While a wife is expected to be categorically loyal to her marital home, questioning that loyalty (either directly or hypothetically) is commonplace, at times even years into a marriage. Additionally, a wife is expected to be loyal to her husband, but if the husband reveals his loyalty to his wife, it is seen as at the expense of his loyalty to his mother and presumed that his loyalty to the wife is because he has been pressured or bewitched by her. Indeed, no man would willingly, rationally choose his wife over his mother. Often, a test of one's manhood is based on his ability to resist the provocative enticements of a wife who might take him away from/turn him against his own family.

A central point in this discourse is that a woman's power is intrinsically tied to a man, regardless of the woman's role or the man's role in the family. Thus, a mother feels that any attention her son may give to his wife jeopardizes *her* position, thus she competes with her son's wife for the son's attention, loyalty and trust. At the same time, women entrench their identities into becoming wives and mothers because of the supposed value assigned to those roles. This sets up a powerful hegemonic system in which the male is neutralized in terms of vying for power, but is simultaneously the source of all power, thus instigating those with little or no power, the women to vie against each other. This system continues to empower men and pit women against each other.

### *Migration and immigrant identity*

In order to understand the dynamics of family amongst South Asians living in the United States, we must briefly examine the immigrant population and the various sub-groups of South Asians that have thus far established residence in the U.S. Immigration within the Asian Indian communities is complex and takes many different forms and each of these migrant narratives shape the more local narrative of family and specific narrative of abuse.

The central core of South Asian immigrants in the United States are post-1965 immigrants. While there are analyses of this immigrant group (Agarwal, 1991; Bacon, 1996; Dasgupta, 1989), this essay focuses on this group in the context of family structure, specifically as it relates to issues of abuse. The post-1965 immigrant group was made up of primarily of men<sup>13</sup> who tended to be upper class and upper caste. This class and caste status served to create a sense of privilege that shaped these men's identities about who they were and what their place was in the larger structure of society. In many ways, these

men *felt* a sense of privilege that we in the U.S. generally associate with White men. This sense of social status both benefited and deterred the immigrant South Asian man's progress. Because they had the class status, they were able to move amongst White middle class and upper class populations with relative adroitness and finesse. This skill was also reminiscent of the skills developed by their families during independence from Britain. However, these men also struggled with the clear and present sense of discrimination they faced without fully understanding or knowing why they faced such bias. In their minds, they were just like white America in terms of class, upbringing, status and cultural élan. Additionally, they upheld the pervasive model minority identity assigned them in the U.S. race matrix (Bhatt, 2003) and believed that the benefits of such a position would be belongingness to the mainstream society.<sup>14</sup> However, despite their sense of belongingness, most of these men faced serious discrimination and were unable to realize success to the standards that they had in the past. This created increased frustration and difficulty for the men and in turn negatively impacted their marital and family relationships.

Most of these immigrant men were well regarded community members who were coming to the US to complete their terminal degrees in the US and/or seek white collar work. However, given U.S. policies regarding foreign education and overall issues of discrimination, many of these men did not find employment in their respective fields of study and turned to business as a way to sustain their families. Those who were in graduate programs struggled to complete their studies and establish their careers. This tenuous time of settlement was exacerbated by the family life cycle as well. Most of these men had either been just married or they may have gone back to South Asia at some point to get married.

The wives of these recent immigrants came to the U.S. with little or no understanding of the migrant experience as well as the experience of being a new wife. Most of these couples had envisioned their marriage in terms of traditional South Asian family structures. For women, this usually meant living with daily/consistent interaction with in-laws. Often depicted as the necessary difficulty in marriage, the parents in-law (specifically the husband's parents) were seen as a part of most marriages. In coming to the United States, the viability of traditional family structures was significantly decreased. This became a central issue as the new couples began to establish families. Raised in the belief that child rearing is a communal/familial activity, most of these young couples had minimal knowledge regarding child rearing and household management solely by parents. This lack of knowledge was exacerbated by the children growing up as second generation Indian-Americans whose entire experience, ranging from education to friendship to pediatric care was distinctly different than that of the parents. Despite the significant shift from a joint family to a nuclear family, the gender expectations did not shift in any discernable way. Thus, the wives were now required to do all the household work and childrearing by themselves without the support system of other women from the joint family. Because women's work is invisible, the husbands had little idea of how work had been distributed in their mothers' homes, thus often could not understand how their wives struggled with completing tasks that has seemed effortless in the family home.

Despite the physical isolation from in-laws, the scepter of the in-laws still existed for these families. At times, it took the form of parents in-law coming to stay with their son and his family in the U.S. This added a level of difficulty to the management of the mother-wife relationship. Unlike these relationships in India, the wife rarely had a cohort of others who were dealing with these issues or if there were other wives in the community, they had little or no skills and status to deal with potential problems between a wife and a mother-in-law. One woman living in the U.S. South Asian diaspora told me, “We (a group of newly married women who had met after migrating to the U.S. from India) knew her (a friend in the group who was pregnant) mother-in-law wasn’t taking good care of her, but we were young. We didn’t know anything about pregnancy or what to say to her mother-in-law. Several of us tried talking to our husbands, but they said to stay out of it. Her mother-in-law was the only elder (here in the U.S.) at that time. How were we to know she would do things that would hurt her daughter-in-law?”

### **Reconceptualizing domestic violence from a South Asian cultural perspective**

Earlier in the essay, I laid out the common, mainstream understanding of domestic violence. Utilizing a critical, post-colonial ethnographic perspective, I then articulated two major emergent themes examining the specific components of South Asian communicative culture which influence the various communities’ ways of understanding familial and social relationships, gender identity, and social power. These themes now serve to frame and synthesize a reconceptualization of domestic violence from a South Asian perspective. This reconceptualization is not intended to replace the mainstream perspective; rather I posit that while domestic violence in South Asian communities does mirror certain aspects of the mainstream model, it also incorporates its own cultural issues in such a manner that makes the violence *look* like mainstream violence, but in actuality has markedly different features. Thus, much of the domestic violence prevention work in the U.S. is categorically ineffective in terms of these communities. Contemporary approaches in these communities address the symptoms, but rarely the cause of the abuse. Additionally, by focusing specifically on the communicative aspects of the domestic violence in the South Asian community, I disrupt the scientific imperialism that centers behavior as a stand alone measure of social phenomena.

The definition of domestic violence must be reconceptualized to extend beyond intimate partner/family member. In South Asian communities, domestic violence is a social phenomenon that is systemic both within the extended family and within the community<sup>15</sup>. The abuse stems from multiple sources from within the family and is also a culturally constructed function that is discursively absolved through references to various cultural beliefs and norms. While the abuse does incorporate both physical and psychological dominance and/or harm, the psychological harm is usually categorically present and rarely recognized as abuse. Older, more orthodox members of the community and in the family rarely recognize psychological dominance as problematic. When such behavior is questioned by more progressive family and community members, it is trivialized as western influence from media, education or social cohorts that is irrelevant in the South Asian community and ultimately will only serve to break down family and cultural values. Additionally, the emotional and verbal abuse can come from various

family members simultaneously, including women and is often presented as *mere* cultural statements, not necessarily direct claims about the individual.

The locus of power in these situations lies within the marital family as a whole and is centered around the family patriarch and matriarch. As explained, earlier, in the extended family, the patriarch makes the major family decisions, but may have no knowledge of what happens amongst the women of the family and thus the matriarch wields an inordinate amount of power within the inner circle of women. This power then belies any corrective measure that can occur simply by “working on” the husband and wife. A poignant example of this occurred during my time in the field as I often watched younger men attempt to disrupt traditional gender roles by helping their wives with chores only to be chastised by their mothers for denying the mother and wife the joy to taking care of them. These actions by the men then incurred greater problems for the wives as their mothers-in-law called to question the wife’s competence because the husband felt *driven* to help.

The husbands’ actions also reveal fissures in a long standing, rigid, orthodox structure of traditional Hindu families and indicate that clearly not all Hindu families are the same, nor are they stagnant. However, the response to these change actions also show us how deep and pervasive these systems have been regardless of location. By no means do I suggest that all Hindu families are the same, yet, the themes that pervade Hinduism emerge in even the most removed of families and play out in even the most contemporary of settings. These cultural structures then warrant strategic articulation such that one can engage them in intentional and meaningful ways.

## **Conclusion**

Utilizing a postcolonial ethnographic approach opens a space to examine the communicative aspects of domestic violence. While by no means negating the crucial need to examine extreme violence, this essay disrupts scientific imperialist demands of physical/behavioral evidence by illuminating the ways in which abuse is first and always communicative. The communication and the communicative climate, especially in terms of performed gender roles create a space of violence in which escalation becomes a high risk. This is a double edged sword; most Hindu families would say that escalation is wrong and that physical abuse is both dishonorable and unacceptable, but they continue to uphold the cultural norms that establish an environment prone to such behaviors. Families that break away from such norms are seen as abnormal (the man is cowed by his wife; *he’s* being abused the woman doesn’t understand her responsibility.) Scholarship about domestic violence must therefore be contextualized culturally and, more importantly, its frames must be refocused to examine the ways in which cultural groups communicate meaning about relational violence through their oral and textual traditions.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sita's story is long and varied. I have highlighted some of the most well known parts of her story and I utilize Valmiki's version of the *Ramayana* as it is the version that is the most well known, widespread and was used as the basis for the television miniseries that dominated the airwaves both in India and throughout the U. S. South Asian diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> Migration violence happens when a spouse (usually the husband) sponsors his wife to come to the U.S. and then uses her probationary visa status to threaten her. All marital visas must be verified after two years to prove that the couple is truly married and not using the marriage as a way to get a green card. If the marriage is not proved, the wife is deported, losing her green card. Additionally, husbands keep their wives' green cards locked away and trick them into traveling to South Asia for a family trip. Once on out of the country, the husband abandons the wife and returns to the U.S. However, she cannot return because she does not have the necessary documentation and the husband denies the validity of the marriage. This situation is further exacerbated when there are children involved. The children are usually U.S. born citizens and ultimately are returned to the U.S. residing parents, denying the mother any access to her children.

<sup>3</sup> Here I use the term private to mean specifically relational privacy. Though abuse may occur in public spaces, in general social norms dictate that we create privacy in the ways in which we move around and navigate such scenes.

<sup>4</sup> While current research has explored the question of domestic violence in same sex relationships, attributing the locus of power to the dominant relational partner, for the purposes of this essay, I focus on the larger body of mainstream research that presumes heterosexuality. Indeed, aspects of the critique presented in this essay may be extended to the GLBT communities.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in India, female children take their father's name as their middle name and take their husband's first name as their middle name at marriage. So, for example a young woman named Sandhya Mahesh Patel (Mahesh Patel being her father) would change her name at marriage to Sandhya Ashok Amin (Ashok Amin being her husband).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, the primary aspect of purity is in terms of sexual behavior, but it also includes purity in terms of thoughts and beliefs about society. Thus, she must be untainted from ideas that might make her question the value of women as wives and mothers.

<sup>7</sup> By the term community, I am utilizing Goffman's notion of communities in being. These are communities that do not necessarily exist in physical space, but emerge as the members come together for specific events or emerge when the idea of this collective is invoked by one or some of its members to reference the group as an entity to which they belong and/or rely upon. (Goffman, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> If a mother dies, the eldest daughter will hold the household together until her father can take another wife (if he is young enough). If the death occurs later in life when the children are already married, the position of matriarch is not necessarily passed on to any one individual. The eldest wife oversees the daily family management, but the major family decisions are usually made by the eldest daughter who is called upon from her marital home.

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<sup>9</sup> Widows are considered bad luck in Hindu society generally and thus, they carry little to no power in the community and society.

<sup>10</sup> This refers only to returns for specified visits. A permanent return home would be the greatest dishonor and bring the greatest level of *sharm* for the woman's natal family.

<sup>11</sup> Bad blood is a reference to her natal lineage including physical lineage (actual blood lines) but also members of the natal family and community who may have negatively influenced her and/or the lack of control by her natal family and community on her in terms of exposure to negative influences.

<sup>12</sup> This essay presumes monogamous marriage though there are polygamous communities amongst South Asian Muslims. The dynamics of sister wives are unique and have added layers of analysis that is beyond the purview of this essay.

<sup>13</sup> While there were also women who immigrated during the post-1965 wave, a majority of them were the spouses of the primary male immigrant. I focus on the male population here to articulate the identity construction that sets a stage for a particular form of abuse in the South Asian community.

<sup>14</sup> This argument by no means is meant to imply that South Asian men did not understand the racism they faced or that they were unaware of the differences between them and mainstream White American society. It only serves to articulate the interpersonal positioning these men were in and the ways in which this positioning shaped their sense of self.

<sup>15</sup> In using the term community, it is important to note that community membership is not voluntary in most South Asian communities. For example, for South Asian Hindus and Sikhs, community includes one's sub-caste (Naathi or Jat), one's village, one's social group, and one's migration cohort. For Muslims, community includes one's mosque membership, one's village, one's social group, and one's migration cohort.